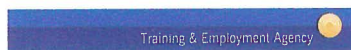


Children First
The Northern Ireland Childcare Strategy

A Policy Statement





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A Policy Statement
September 1999





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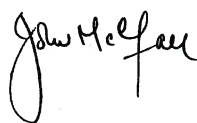


FOREWORD

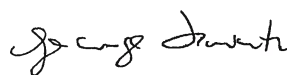
Family life is the foundation of our society, and support for families is a cornerstone of Government policy in health and social services, education and training. While parents will always have the primary responsibility for the care and well-being of their children, *Children First* outlines the measures the Government is taking to help and support them.

The Government's aim is to ensure high quality, affordable childcare for children aged up to 14 in every local community in Northern Ireland. This policy statement takes account of a range of comments in response to the earlier consultative document and we are grateful to all those who responded.

Measures are being taken to improve quality, increase access, provide better information and make childcare more affordable. An additional £61 million will be made available over the next 3 years to implement this strategy, but successful implementation will depend on a range of professions, agencies and voluntary bodies working together. New structures will be put in place to facilitate this. This policy statement sets a vision for the future of our children and presents a challenge to all those with a part to play in achieving that aim.



JOHN McFALL
Minister with responsibility for
Education and Training



GEORGE HOWARTH
Minister for Health and
Social Services



CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION


- 1.1 The Government is committed to supporting children and families. The Northern Ireland Childcare Strategy, as part of a national framework, is an essential component of that support. This document updates Northern Ireland's 1994 policy framework on early years provision, which was published by the Department of Health and Social Services and the Department of Education to promote the development of provision for children aged under 12, but with a particular emphasis on children aged up to 5. Response to consultation on the new strategy supported **extending this age range to 14. The age range for this strategy is therefore 0-14.**

Existing provision

- 1.2 Childcare in Northern Ireland is available in a range of settings in the statutory, voluntary and private sectors. The majority of places are provided by the community, voluntary and private sectors, many on a part-time basis. Current services fall far short of the Government's vision. Provision is uneven and poorly co-ordinated. Care for school age children and children with special needs is particularly limited.

Structures

- 1.3 Responsibility for the social and economic policy issues associated with childcare currently rests with three Departments: Health and Social Services, Education and Economic Development. It is important that there are structures in place to co-ordinate work amongst them to deliver a coherent overall strategy and an Inter-Departmental Group on Early Years was therefore created in 1995. Its members consist of senior officials from the three Departments, the Education and Training Inspectorate and the Social Services Inspectorate. **This arrangement enables the Departments to work together to promote and develop child care and pre-school education in accordance with international standards of good practice and will therefore remain in place.**



1.4 A Regional Consultative Forum on Early Years was established in 1994 to include voluntary and private sector provider representatives and other relevant interests. **Its remit and membership will be reviewed in the light of changes brought about by this strategy.**

1.5 At a more local level, four Area Early Years Committees have been providing an inter-agency forum for the development of childcare and family support to meet the needs of their local population. **These committees will form the basis of new Childcare Partnerships which will be responsible for implementing this strategy at local level.**

Why do we need a new strategy?

1.6 Childcare in Northern Ireland faces three main challenges:

- quality is variable;
- the cost is out of reach of many parents;
- in some areas there are not enough childcare places and parents' access to them is hampered by poor information.

1.7 In response to these challenges the strategy document *Children First* was published for consultation at the end of February 1999. Over 2,000 copies were issued. The consultation ended on 30 April. Sixty nine responses were received: a summary is at Annex A.

1.8 In publishing this Policy Statement, the Government's aim is to ensure high quality, affordable childcare for children aged up to 14 in every local community in Northern Ireland.



CHAPTER TWO

PRINCIPLES

- 2.1 The Northern Ireland Childcare Strategy is grounded in the principles of inclusion and social justice; quality; affordability; flexibility; accessibility; and partnership. It will be implemented in conformity with the Government's commitments under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, including as far as practicable encouraging children to express their views on the care provided for them, and respecting those views. It will take account of the European Council Recommendation on Childcare (1992) and subsequent guidance on its implementation.

Social Inclusion

- 2.2 Some individuals and families in many parts of the population suffer from multiple social problems and are effectively excluded from the social and economic life of the community. The Government is tackling this through the New Targeting Social Need initiative. Good quality childcare and early education can make an important contribution towards promoting equality and social inclusion. Groups and areas in greatest need will be targeted as part of this strategy.

Quality

- 2.3 The Government wants to ensure that all childcare is of good quality so that it meets children's developmental needs and parents can have confidence in it. There is clear evidence that good quality, appropriate care in their earliest years has long term benefits for children's physical, social and intellectual development. School age children likewise benefit from opportunities to take part in activities where they are responsible for choosing what to do and for seeing project through to its conclusion.
- 2.4 The people delivering childcare are crucial to the quality of service provided. The childcare sector needs to attract people who can make a significant contribution to the development of children and childcare workers need to be suitably trained and qualified to carry out the work.



Affordability

2.5 Different families pay widely varying amounts for childcare and, for some, the cost of childcare is so high they cannot afford to work. It is important therefore to have a range of provision which provides more choice for all families, especially those on a modest income.

Access

2.6 The Government wants to ensure that a range of good quality childcare is available in every community to allow parents to choose childcare which meets their particular needs as individuals and families. A substantial increase in the number of childcare places available in different settings is essential to ensure this.

'Family friendly' workplace practices

2.7 The Government wants to promote 'family friendly' policies and practices among employers in Northern Ireland. Employers can play an important part in the development of childcare. The business case for 'family friendly' policies is becoming more compelling as patterns of work and family life continue to change.

Information

2.8 In deciding on suitable childcare for their children, parents should have access to:

- accurate and current advice on what to look for in a childcare service;
- help in deciding on the most suitable arrangement for their children, particularly for children with special needs;
- up-to-date details on what childcare places are available in the area where they live or work; and
- advice on financial support that may be available to help them meet the cost of childcare, including advice on benefits and the childcare tax credit.

Partnership

2.9 The success of this strategy will depend on a range of professions and agencies working in partnership with local communities, parents and employers. In particular the voice of these partners needs to be strengthened in the planning processes.



CHAPTER THREE

QUALITY

Integration of education and care

- 3.1 The Government has made clear that its long-term goal is to integrate early education and care within a wider supportive framework of services for children and parents. Education and daycare services for young children, and services for their parents, should be better co-ordinated, and provided as close together as possible. The Curricular Guidance for Pre-school Education, issued in 1997 by the Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, represents a shared view of what constitutes good quality of pre-school provision in the education and care sectors.
- 3.2 Responses to the consultation show that there are concerns among childcare providers about the different criteria applied by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) and the registration and inspection units within Health and Social Services Trusts and that there is a need for closer working to clarify for providers the respective roles and responsibilities of the two inspectorial regimes and the reasons for differences in standards. **ETI, SSI and registration and inspection units within Health and Social Services Trusts will work together to develop as far as possible common standards to inform inspection in early education and childcare settings.**

Registration and inspection

- 3.3 Quality assurance for childcare is at present concentrated on registration, inspection, investigation and enforcement under the Children Order. The regulatory framework is supplemented by DHSS guidance on the suitability of service providers, premises and equipment; adult to child ratios; and the physical environment in which care takes place. **In response to concerns about differences between Health and Social Services Trusts in the standards expected, DHSS and SSI will promote training of registration and inspection staff to improve consistency in the application of the regulations and guidance associated with Part XI of the Children Order.**



Accreditation schemes

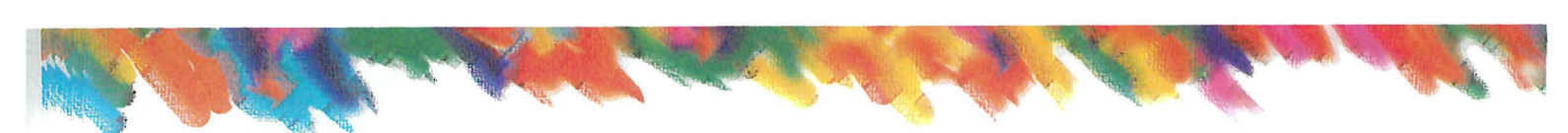
- 3.4 Statutory regulation helps to assure minimum standards, but childcare providers should be encouraged to go beyond that. Improvements in the quality of childcare can be supported in a range of ways, including accreditation schemes. Responses to the consultation called for a single accreditation scheme. **The Inter-Departmental Group on Early Years will invite relevant childcare organisations to work together with the group to develop common standards for accreditation in Northern Ireland.**

Good Practice Networks

- 3.5 There was general support in the consultation for the development of Good Practice Networks in Northern Ireland. These may take the form of a network of associated services co-ordinated in such a way as to form an integrated response to children's and parents' needs within a local community. They will be expected to offer childcare and education, including education for children with special educational needs, and other services designed to support families, such as parenting skills, family learning and adult literacy. They will stimulate and disseminate good practice and offer support and training to other providers in their areas. **The Inter-Departmental Group on Early Years has set criteria and invited applications for the establishment of a small number of Good Practice Networks.**

Support for parents

- 3.6 **Action to raise the quality of formal childcare will be complemented by support for parents and informal carers.** During 1999 the Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment will be producing guidance for schools on teaching parenting skills. DHSS is working with the Parents' Advice Centre to strengthen their telephone helpline for parents; and Northern Ireland will be included in the National Family and Parenting Institute, which has been established to provide authoritative advice on parenting support issues. DHSS will identify other relevant elements of national family policy where action is required for Northern Ireland and put forward proposals for dealing with these.
- 3.7 The involvement of parents in their child's education has long been



recognised as instrumental in educational success at school, as well as having a positive effect on behaviour, and many schools already take active steps to involve parents as fully as possible in their work through, for example, paired reading schemes, adult education classes on site and volunteer work.

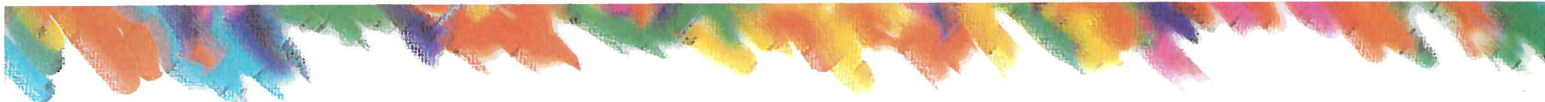
The Department of Education is working to increase parents' involvement and has secured some £600k across the 3 years 1999-2000 to 2001-2002 to establish pilot parenting groups across Northern Ireland.

Education and Library Boards are currently working up proposals, but it is envisaged that these groups will be focussed on providing support to parents of pupils who are experiencing difficulties at school. The broad objective will be to help parents develop and increase their interest in, and contribution to, their child's education and thus to support the pupils concerned.

Qualifications and training

3.8 The people delivering childcare are crucial to the quality of service provided. Many of them are volunteers or part-time employees with little or no career structure and little recognition of their skills and experience. In many cases, existing workers in the childcare field who have experience but no recognised qualification cannot afford to pay fees to gain a qualification. Existing mainstream vocational training programmes do not address the training and assessment needs of people already in employment in the childcare sector.

3.9 The Government is developing a national 'climbing frame' of qualifications to help people enter, move and progress in the childcare sector, as well as to move to other related occupations. The framework will map out the equivalencies between the various forms of training, qualifications and progression routes and relate these to NVQs. Within the framework there will need to be training on entry to the profession, ongoing skills training, support for working towards qualifications, and continuous development to keep skills updated and to enable progression to higher levels and into different areas of work. **The Inter-Departmental Group on Early Years will promote the use of the national 'climbing frame' of qualifications in Northern Ireland.**



3.10 T&EA will develop a childcare training strategy for Northern Ireland, in consultation with other relevant Departments and other stakeholders including employers in the sector and the National Training Organisations, and will aim to ensure that the resources available are used as efficiently and effectively as possible.

Recruitment

3.11 The increases in childcare provision required by this strategy will also require more new staff to be recruited into the field. In particular, the expansion in out-of-school childcare will need more people trained in playwork and youth work to work with older children. An early task will be to raise awareness among potential recruits of the opportunities available in work with children. **T&EA is working towards providing 1,250 training opportunities in childcare through the New Deal by the year 2002.**

3.12 Recruiting the right people to work with children also involves making sure employers have sound recruitment and employment practices, as well as good supervision procedures. **Under the strategy, more information will be available to parents on the standards required of those working in formal childcare.**

3.13 **The introduction of the minimum wage will ensure that childcare workers' pay does not fall short of a decent minimum.** Better pay and a better defined progression route for childcare workers, in conjunction with greater information for parents on the skills possessed by childcare workers, will help to raise the standards, status and attractiveness of childcare as an occupation.

Research

3.14 It is important that the implementation of the strategy is fully informed by the most up-to-date research evidence available. **The Inter-Departmental Group will take forward the current research project on *Effective Pre-school provision in Northern Ireland* and will consider further research as the need arises.**



CHAPTER FOUR

ACCESS

- 4.1 The Government wants to ensure that a range of good quality childcare is available in every community to allow parents to choose childcare which meets their needs. A substantial increase in the number of childcare places available in different settings is essential to the success of *Children First*.

Sure Start

- 4.2 Provision for children under 4 will be enhanced through the implementation in Northern Ireland of the Sure Start programme, adapted as necessary to Northern Ireland's particular priorities and circumstances. This programme aims to work with parents and children under 4 in areas of social disadvantage to promote the physical, intellectual and social development of pre-school children to ensure they have the best start in life. Sure Start is intended to build on evidence of what works well and will involve a range of services including early education and play, childcare, healthcare and family support. It will be important to incorporate and enhance existing services aimed at helping families in need. **An additional £9.9m over the period to March 2002 will be made available to support the implementation of Sure Start. The Inter-Departmental Group will work with the Childcare Partnerships to set up the first Sure Start programmes by April 2000. Detailed guidance will be issued in September.**

Pre-school education

- 4.3 The Government is committed to providing a good quality pre-school education place for every 4 year old whose parents wish them to have it, and to extend this entitlement to 3 year olds over time. These commitments have been translated to suit Northern Ireland circumstances and are being delivered through the Pre-school Education Expansion Programme. **Some 4,500 additional pre-school education places have already been made available and by 2002 we aim to have another 4,700 places available. This will cover 85% of children in their pre-school year.**



Out-of-school provision

- 4.4 **As part of the Government's strategy for widening the benefits of the National Lottery, £9.9 million will be available through the New Opportunities Fund from 1999 to 2003 to support the establishment of out-of-school childcare in Northern Ireland.**

This investment will allow an expansion of about 12,000 places. The aim is to have an out-of-school project available in every community. In addition, funding will be available for out-of-school learning activities designed to enhance educational attainment. Some of these projects will include a childcare element. This will serve to strengthen the links between childcare and education services.

Meeting special needs

- 4.5 **Plans for the development of childcare services (see para 7.4) will be required to meet the needs of all families,** including those where the children have special educational needs or disabilities; those from ethnic or linguistic minority communities; and families living in isolated rural communities.

Affordability

- 4.6 The Government wants to ensure that those who need good quality childcare can afford it. **The Working Families Tax Credit will mean a fairer deal for around 1.5 million working families with children throughout the UK, including support for childcare costs.**



CHAPTER FIVE

CHILDCARE AND WORK

Government's role

5.1 The Government is reviewing arrangements for maternity leave and pay, which are over-complex, outdated and unfair.

Implementation of the EC Directive on parental leave is scheduled for December 1999 and the EC Directives on working time and part time working provide opportunities for working parents to reconcile their earning and caring opportunities.

Employers' role

5.2 Employers can play an important part in the development of childcare, and many have already recognised the strong business case for helping their staff to reconcile family and work responsibilities. The benefits to employers of 'family friendly' policies include the retention of skilled, trained workers, a wider pool of skilled personnel from which to recruit, and less stress and absenteeism among their workers. A significant number of employers provide some 'family friendly practices', such as flexible working patterns but there are also ways in which employers can help their employees to access childcare. **In co-operation with the Department for Education and Employment, Opportunity Now and other relevant agencies, T&EA will develop a communications strategy for promoting 'family friendly' employment in Northern Ireland.**



Government as an employer

5.3 The Government has a significant role as an employer in Northern Ireland and recognises the importance of maintaining and reviewing the measures in place to help civil servants balance their work and family responsibilities. This approach is consistent with the Northern Ireland Civil Service's commitment to providing equality of opportunity for all its staff by seeking to recruit, retain and promote the best people available. Virtually all civil servants can now apply to vary their working hours, work part-time or job share or take a career break. There are various childcare arrangements within individual Departments and agencies.



CHAPTER SIX

INFORMATION

The requirement

- 6.1 The increase in the supply of childcare places must be matched by improvements in the information available for parents, employers and childcare providers. Parents can only make good decisions about childcare for their family when they have access to up-to-date information on which to base their decisions. Good quality information can also be used by employers to support their employees who have childcare responsibilities. Good advice and information is also important for people who are considering offering new childcare services. Information held should be comprehensive, covering costs, opening times, vacancies, qualifications of provider staff and should be accessible in a wide range of facilities including libraries, schools, community centres, government public offices and primary care centres.

The sources

- 6.2 Health and Social Services Trusts and organisations representing providers, such as the Northern Ireland Pre-School Playgroup Association, PlayBoard and the Northern Ireland Childminding Association, are the main sources of information about childcare. In the consultation there was support for an agreed regional approach to the development of a comprehensive strategy to produce an information service, which could be delivered locally.

- 6.3 DHSS will establish a Childcare Information Project Board with representation from all relevant agencies to identify childcare information needs and bring forward proposals about how these needs can best be met.** Funding will be made available for this regional development work. Childcare Plans will then be expected to demonstrate how information services in each Health and Social Services Board area will be developed to meet regional standards, building on Trusts' existing statutory role, so that all parents and employers can easily access the information they need, when they need it.



CHAPTER SEVEN

PARTNERSHIP

Childcare Partnerships



7.1 The effective delivery of this strategy will require a wide range of bodies to work in partnership: Government Departments, statutory agencies, employers, parents, voluntary and community organisations and childcare providers. Effective regional and local co-ordinating structures are needed.

7.2 Four new Childcare Partnerships will be established to take forward this strategy. Their key tasks will be:

- assessing the demand for childcare and family support for all children and the supply of places and services available to meet it;
- setting achievable local targets for filling the gap between existing supply and demand across the range of services;
- producing Childcare Plans (see para 7.4);
- ensuring that childcare information services are available which meet national standards; and
- raising the quality of childcare.

7.3 There will continue to be a single Partnership covering each Health and Social Services Board area. Each partnership will be expected to include adequate representation of community, parents' and employers' perspectives.



Childcare Plans

- 7.4 **The new Childcare Partnerships will each be required to draw up a Childcare Plan setting out how childcare needs in its area will be met.** The Plan should identify priorities, timescales, local targets, responsibility for delivering different aspects of the strategy, and the use to be made of the various sources of funding available. The first plans should cover the year from April 2000 and will be required by January 2000.
- 7.5 In drawing up their Childcare Plans, Childcare Partnerships will need to pay particular attention to the wishes and needs of parents. They will be expected to promote a diversity of provision in partnership with providers.
- 7.6 **Partnerships will have to consider how they can best meet the needs of all children from all communities, including those with special social and educational needs and those with a disability.** They will need to recognise and respect the needs and expectations of children and families from ethnic or linguistic minorities and to reflect the principles and objectives of the Government's New Targeting Social Need initiative.
- 7.7 **The Inter-Departmental Group intends to issue guidance on the remit and membership of local Childcare Partnerships in September 1999.** This guidance will set out who should be represented on the Partnerships, what they will be expected to do and how they will be funded.

Planning and co-ordination at Northern Ireland level

- 7.8 In view of the continuing interest of several Departments, there is still a need for a co-ordinating role at a Northern Ireland level to take forward work on this strategy. **The Inter-Departmental Group on Early Years will continue to carry out this function and will review the membership and remit of the Regional Consultative Forum on Early Years in the light of responses to the consultation on *Children First*.**

CHAPTER EIGHT

FUNDING



8.1 Existing funding for childcare comes from a mix of sources, including the Exchequer, parents' and employers' contributions, grants from statutory agencies, and special funds. Substantial additional Government funding has already been made available to Education and Library Boards to expand pre-school education (£10.4m in 1998/99) and to Health and Social Services Boards to meet their obligations under the Children Order. An additional £61m will be made available over the next three years, made up of:

- | | |
|---|--------|
| • Sure Start (from April 2000) | £9.9m |
| • Pre-school Education Expansion (3 and 4 year olds) | £27.4m |
| • New Opportunities Fund support for out-of-school child care | £ 9.9m |
| • Training under the New Deal for workers in the childcare sector | £ 7.0m |
| • Childcare allowances for T&EA trainees | £ 1.9m |
| • Childhood Fund (1999/2000 only) | £ 4.9m |

8.2 Some £0.6m will also be made available in 1999/2000 to Childcare Partnerships for infrastructure development.



ANNEX

SUMMARY OF RESPONSES TO CONSULTATION ON CHILDREN FIRST

Introduction

1. The Northern Ireland Childcare Strategy *Children First* was issued for consultation at the end of February 1999. It set out the Government's aim to ensure that good quality, affordable childcare is available for children in every neighbourhood, including both formal childcare and support for informal arrangements.
2. Over 2,000 copies were issued to a range of organisations and individuals. The consultees included Area Early Years Committees, Pre-school Education Advisory Groups, Directors of Social Services in each Health and Social Services Board and HSS Trust, Health and Social Services Councils, Education and Library Boards, education providers, other Government Departments, DHSS central advisory committees and child care voluntary organisations. In addition, views were sought from the political parties, Northern Ireland MPs, members of the Northern Ireland Assembly, the universities, and employers and trade union representatives.
3. To ensure that as many organisations and individuals as possible were given the opportunity to comment on the draft strategy, DHSS ran a consultative conference, which was attended by around 150 people, and two smaller workshops which brought together expert focus groups to look at specific areas of the Strategy.



Analysis of responses

4. The consultation ended on 30 April. 69 responses were received. This annex gives a summary of the points raised in the responses and indicates the action proposed.
5. Key messages from respondents were:
 - a general welcome for the publication of a Childcare Strategy;
 - concern that its emphasis appeared to be on economic and employment issues rather than putting children first;
 - support for the commitment to raise quality;
 - concern that the Strategy did not address the holistic needs of families with young children given that Northern Ireland has not issued a document comparable to the Home Office's *Supporting Families* ;
 - criticism of the absence of clear commitment to fund Sure Start or a comparable programme for young children and their families in Northern Ireland;
 - support for an extended remit for the existing Area Early Years Committees to carry out the proposed functions of Childcare Partnerships in England;
 - support for the Strategy to cover a wider age range than the current 0-11 age band, with the majority supporting a remit of 0-14 as in England;
 - concern that some of the funding sources identified in the document to implement the Strategy are short-term and inadequate.
6. A number of respondents were critical that the Inter-Departmental Group on Early Years did not intend to publish a final version of the Strategy reflecting the views expressed during the consultation exercise.



SPECIFIC CONSULTATION POINTS AND PROPOSED RESPONSE

Raising the Quality of Care - Regulation and Good Practice

Consultation point 1: Registration and inspection


On improving education and social services regulatory standards and inspection systems and co-ordination between education and social services, some of the respondents called for a unified system of regulation and inspection across the two sectors. Others stopped short of this, but called for more consultation and collaboration between education and social services to reach common standards to inform inspection across both sectors. The need for a collaborative approach to inspecting providers in the Pre-school Education Expansion Programme was highlighted by some respondents, as these providers are subject to inspection by both education and social services. There was also support for joint training of education and social services inspectors. Differences between Trusts in interpretation of the regulations and guidance associated with Part XI of the Children Order were also identified as a problem.

Consultation point 2: Accreditation

There was general support for accreditation schemes as a means of improving quality. Several respondents called for all the main players to be involved in developing a “common scheme” which would be accepted by and accessible to all categories of care.

Consultation point 3: Good practice

There was general support for the development of Good Practice Networks in Northern Ireland. Respondents stressed the need for robust, regionally agreed eligibility criteria, which should reflect good practice rather than good marketing. Respondents felt that, as well as childcare and early education provision, the Networks should cover a range of services for families with children up to age 14, including childminding, family support, training for parenting, health care and drop-in facilities for



families. The Networks should also provide staff development and training for other childcare providers. There was acceptance that while a single site providing the full range of services might be an option in an urban area, a co-ordinated network as proposed in the document would be more feasible in a rural area. It was felt important that the Networks should build on existing projects and their community links.

- Response:**
- **The Government acknowledges that there are genuine concerns among providers about the different criteria applied by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) and the Health and Social Services Trusts registration and inspection units and that there is a need for closer working to clarify for providers the respective roles and responsibilities of the two inspectorial regimes and the reasons for differences in standards.**
 - **ETI and SSI will work together to develop as far as possible common standards to inform inspection in early education and childcare settings.**
 - **DHSS and SSI will promote training of Health and Social Services Trust registration and inspection staff in the application of the regulations and guidance associated with Part XI of the Children Order.**
 - **The Inter-Departmental Group on Early Years will invite relevant childcare organisations to work together to develop common standards for accreditation in Northern Ireland.**
 - **The Inter-Departmental Group on Early Years will set criteria and invite applications for the establishment of a small number of Good Practice Networks. Initial funding to develop these will be available from the Childhood Fund.**



Raising the Quality of Care - Staffing

Consultation points 4 and 5: Supply, recruitment and training of childcare workers

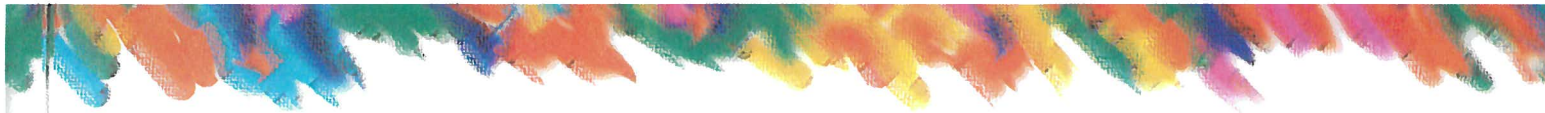
Many respondents felt that childcare should be regarded as a profession and that the status and pay of early years workers should be raised. Suggested ways of achieving this included salaries which reflect higher qualifications and a clear system of career progression. A few respondents suggested that more men should be encouraged to work in childcare.

Many respondents supported the view in *Children First* that working with children requires careful selection of suitable candidates. They therefore felt that this was an important qualification to the suggestion in *Children First* that parents and young people participating in the New Deal were key potential sources of childcare and play workers.

There was general support for the Government's intention to establish a framework for childcare qualifications that would map out equivalencies so that childcare workers could see how their qualifications match up to the NVQ standards. Some respondents called for a fundamental review of training arrangements and the development of a coherent training strategy. A common view was that there were too many training courses at present. Many respondents indicated that long term funding would be needed to underpin training initiatives.

A substantial number of respondents pointed out that the six month training period within the New Deal is not sufficient to allow participants to obtain an NVQ qualification.

- Response:**
- The Government accepts in principle that higher qualifications should attract better pay. Apart from the Government's introduction of the national minimum wage, pay is a matter for employers.
 - The Inter-Departmental Group on Early Years will promote the national framework for qualifications, initially by providing information for existing and potential childcare employers and workers on the framework and how they can use it.

- 
- T&EA will develop a childcare training strategy for Northern Ireland, in consultation with relevant Departments, employers in the sector, the National Training Organisations, and other stakeholders; and will aim to ensure that the resources available are used as efficiently and effectively as possible.
 - T&EA is working towards achieving the target of providing 1,250 training opportunities in childcare through the New Deal.

Making Childcare More Accessible

Consultation point 6: Strengthening the quality of care through families and friends

There was a general feeling that parenting was undervalued in *Children First*. The need for future Government policy to focus on parenting in its broadest sense was highlighted. There was a strong call for the implementation of the Sure Start initiative and the programmes outlined in *Supporting Families*. Respondents supported the provision of more voluntary outreach services such as Homestart and called for adequate core funding to voluntary organisations to implement the Strategy. Other proposals for strengthening care through families included extending the availability of parent/carer and toddler groups and providing training aimed at carers who are not required to register under the Children Order.

Consultation point 7: Assistance with childcare costs

Respondents flagged up a diverse range of families who need help with childcare costs, including parents who are unemployed, parents with a mental illness, people suffering from addictions, people from minority communities, students, teenage parents, and victims of the Troubles.



Consultation point 8: Groups requiring special attention

A wide range of people was highlighted as requiring special attention in planning and providing childcare. These included parents of children aged under 4, people in rural areas, ethnic minorities and families of children with a disability.

Consultation point 9: Services for children under 4


The full implementation of Sure Start was viewed as the main way to strengthen services for children under 4 and their families. Many respondents stressed the importance of placing more value on the roles of parents and health professionals.

There was strong general support for the general principles of Sure Start and the national guidance on Sure Start. The range of services seen as essential include:

- outreach and home visiting support to families;
- good quality play, learning, childcare and child health provision;
- help to access specialised services, for both children and parents.

Respondents thought it important that individual projects should be carefully managed, with one person having overall responsibility to coordinate the work and manage the budget, and that projects should be carefully monitored and evaluated.

- Response:**
- **The Pre-school Education Expansion Programme and the New Opportunities Fund support for out-of-school childcare will bring about major expansions in provision for children aged 3 and over.**
 - **DHSS will identify relevant elements of *Supporting Families* where comparable action has not yet been taken for Northern Ireland and develop proposals for addressing these.**

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- Additional funding has already been made available to Health and Social Services Trusts to meet their obligations to children in need. DHSS will review the extent to which such funding is actually being used to support childcare for children in need.
 - Those groups identified by respondents as requiring special attention will be given priority in the guidance to be issued to Childcare Partnerships.
 - DHSS will allocate £9.9m over the period to March 2002 for an initiative comparable to Sure Start, adapted as necessary to Northern Ireland's particular priorities and circumstances, for families with children aged under 4 and will work with Childcare Partnerships to establish a small number of pilots by April 2000.


Childcare and Work

Consultation point 10: Barriers to employers

The barriers to 'family friendly' employment practices identified by respondents included:

- cost;
- lack of incentive where the employer has no difficulty attracting and retaining staff;
- size of business and lack of flexibility in running small businesses;
- nature of the business in some cases; and
- lack of information on good practice, particularly for smaller businesses.

Suggested ways to encourage employers included an awareness raising and communications strategy, possibly undertaken by Opportunity Now. Some respondents suggested accreditation/incentive/award schemes and some called for more research to be done with employers and employees to identify what practices would be most helpful. Government's main contribution was identified as providing a role model, as a major employer.

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- Response:**
- In co-operation with the Department for Education and Employment, Opportunity Now and other relevant agencies, T&EA will develop a communications strategy for promoting family friendly employment in Northern Ireland.

Improving Information on Childcare

Consultation points 11-13: Information services

There was support for an agreed regional approach to the development of a comprehensive strategy to produce an information service, which could be delivered locally. There was general agreement among those who responded that information held should be comprehensive, covering costs, opening times, vacancies, qualifications of provider staff and that it should be accessible in a wide range of facilities including libraries, schools, community centres, government public offices and primary care centres. Issues of confidentiality and data protection were raised by a few respondents. Some respondents raised issues about accessibility of information to non-English speaking and disabled parents.

- Response:**
- DHSS accepts the need for a comprehensive system which can operate at local level but to agreed regional standards. DHSS will ensure that a project board with representation from all relevant agencies is set up to identify more precisely what the needs are and bring forward proposals about how they can best be met. Funding will be provided for developmental work at the regional level.

Delivering the Strategy

Consultation point 14: Childcare Partnerships

The widespread view was that the four existing Area Early Years Committees (AEYCs) represented the best basis for taking forward the Strategy. Some respondents advocated a review of the roles of AEYCs and Pre-school Education Advisory Groups to ensure a partnership approach, while others suggested combining the two. Some suggested that Childcare Partnerships would require dedicated resources to support their work.



Consultation point 15-18: Remit and membership of Partnerships

The changes most frequently proposed in the membership of the AEYCs were to strengthen parent, employer and community representation.

While some respondents proposed wider age groups for varying reasons, the most common response was in favour of 0-14, in line with England and Wales.

In general, respondents agreed with the proposed tasks for Childcare Partnerships in *Children First*, although the timescale for production of the first Childcare Plans was felt to be ambitious.

Consultation point 19: Regional structures

In considering the regional structures required to implement the Strategy, some respondents questioned the need for the continuance of the Regional Consultative Forum on Early Years, proposing instead an expanded Inter-Departmental Group on Early Years which would include the non-profit and private sectors. Others thought that the role and remit of the Forum should be reviewed to take account of the revised remit of Childcare Partnerships.

- Response:
- **DHSS will establish Childcare Partnerships. and issue guidance on their membership and remit by September 1999.**
 - **The Childcare Partnerships' remit will cover childcare for children aged 0-14, and the guidance will include advice on how parents and employers might best be represented.**
 - **DHSS will commission the first Childcare Plans to be completed by January 2000 to cover the year commencing April 2000.**
 - **DHSS will contribute towards the costs of administrative support for the Childcare Partnerships.**

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- The Inter-Departmental Group on Early Years and the Regional Consultative Forum will remain as two separate bodies. The Inter-Departmental Group will review the Regional Consultative Forum's role and membership, in consultation with the Forum.

Further copies

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